

Landslide risk forces evacuation of San Pablo home

Jaxon Van Derbeken and Kat Wade, San Francisco Chronicle, 3-27-11

Faced with the onslaught of moving earth, Blanka Walker and her family - helped by 40 members of her local church - moved quickly to get everything of value out of her endangered hillside home in San Pablo on Saturday afternoon.

"There would be no way for me to do it alone, so everybody is helping," said Walker.

Her three-bedroom house on Wyman Street was yellow-tagged and ordered vacated by sundown by city crews worried about a slow-motion slide down a water-soaked hillside.

Walker, 35, her husband, Leon, and two young daughters will now be forced to live in a hotel while city engineers assess the situation. She said a crack has formed in the earth below her home and trees in the backyard are leaning precariously with the force of the moving earth.

She said she had no idea about the landslide risk when she bought her home seven years ago.

"Now it's just going down the hill - you can't stop the earth no matter what they do," she said. "I'm out of a home and out of a house."

She enlisted congregants from the Hillcrest Baptist Church to help cram her valuables into a rented U-Haul truck. She said her cat, Kimmy, will have to live with the neighbors.

"I can't do anything," she said. "It would be nice if they could save the house so I can go back. But they would have to stabilize the hill. How's that going to happen?"

Nervous authorities watched two other homes in the 5900 block of Wyman Street and three homes at the bottom of the hill at Hillcrest Road as new rains hit already saturated earth.

Kelsey Worthy, assistant city manager of San Pablo, said several experts have been brought in to assess the situation. "It's the yards moving at this point, the yards are moving into the back of the houses on Hillcrest," Worthy said.

Worthy said the rain had stopped by midday. "I see blue skies behind us, the clouds are moving away." The forecast, however, called for more showers later Saturday and today.

"We're hopeful - it depends on the weather," Worthy added. "We got a lot of rain this morning, that didn't help."

Meanwhile, the seaside village of Capitola was besieged a second time as a new band of heavy rains hit. The Monterey Bay town was first hit during a torrential downpour Thursday afternoon when a storm-drain pipe burst, creating a virtual geyser that flooded the community. Several mobile homes were condemned, one was destroyed and the mobile home park was ordered evacuated.

"This morning, we had a re-enactment of that in spades," Councilman Kirby Nicol said Saturday as he surveyed the damage at the inundated 41-unit Pacific Cove mobile home park as well as in the flooded Capitola Village.

The biggest storm hit at 9:30 a.m. Saturday, sending a new torrent through the damaged drain, through the town and back to the nearby Soquel Creek, which did not overflow.

The worst appeared over by early Saturday afternoon, Nicol said. Damage was estimated in the millions.

A 3-foot wall of water surged by many city buildings, and standing water remained in many structures in the village, the councilman said. The latest onslaught of rain came at low tide, limiting the flooding from water surging into the creek from the sea.

"We have a muddy mess down here, that is the bad news," Nicol said. "The good news is, I don't think anyone has gotten hurt."

Other communities also were coping with storm damage.

Residents of about 160 homes in and around Pleasanton had no drinkable water after a landslide damaged a water main on Friday. Crews have started repairs, but residents were being advised to not drink tap water until at least Monday.

The affected homes were in upper Kilkare Canyon, stretching from Pleasanton Ridge to Sunol, along with several homes on Longview Drive and Santos Ranch Road.

In San Mateo County, mud slides and fallen trees Saturday morning closed Highway 84 from Skyline Boulevard and Portola Road in Woodside. Authorities said they had no estimate of when the roadway would reopen.